

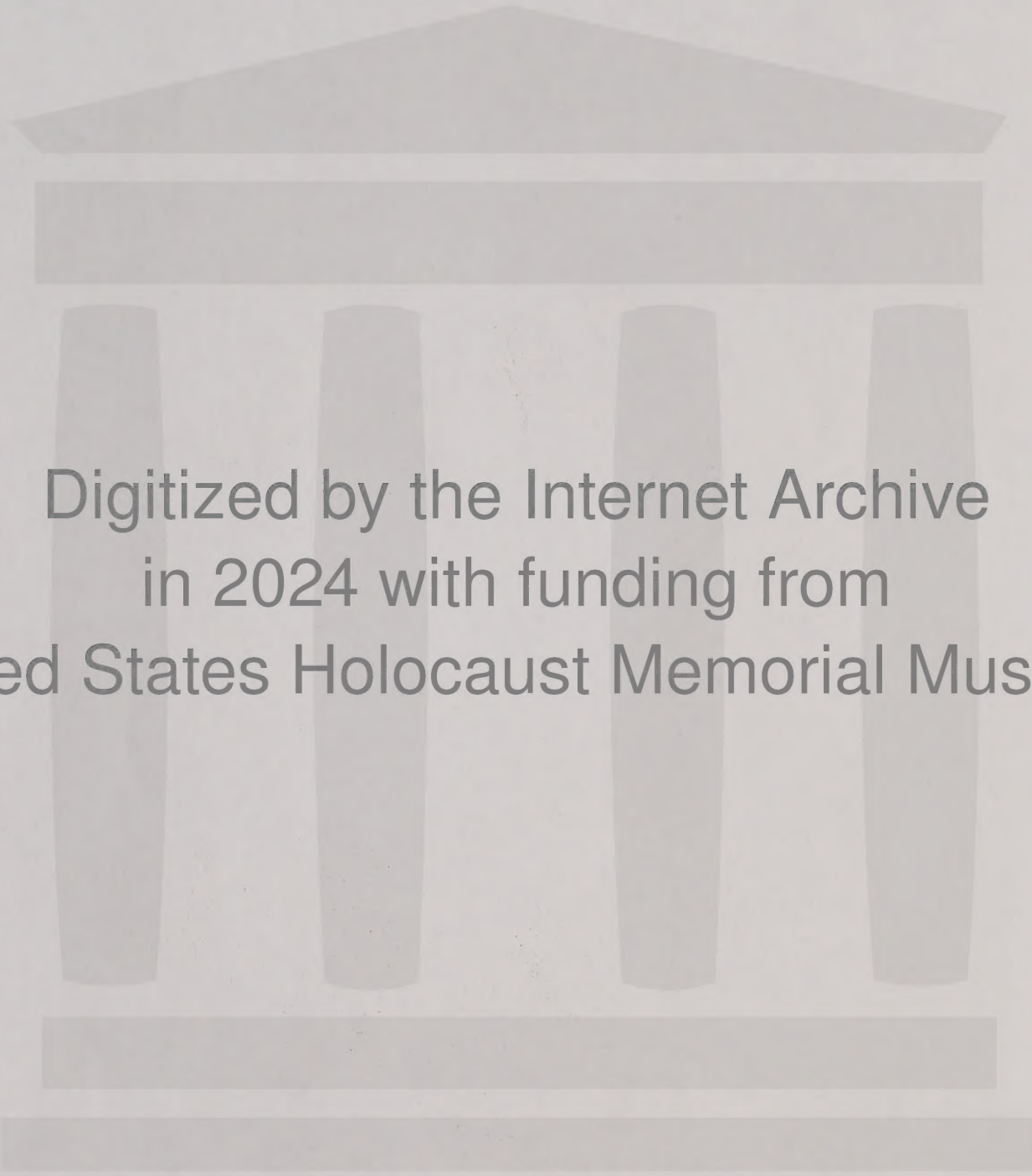


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In Each Other's Likeness:

Twin Brothers Separated by Faith After the Holocaust

by

Eugene L. Pogany

"Isaac...breathed his last and died. He was gathered to his family...and...was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob." --Genesis, 35:28-29

"...for now we see through a glass darkly; then face to face..."

--Corinthians, 13:12

I have learned only recently that following World War II, my uncle, the late Monsignor George Pogany added prayers during his daily celebration of the mass not only for family members who had perished during the war but also for his beloved identical twin brother--my father--who survived the Holocaust but who chose to return to Judaism, the religion of the brothers'

birth. After they were reunited following the war, his brother had leveled at him the centuries-old accusation of apostasy. Though spoken long ago, the statement has reverberated down through the years creating unseen fault lines under the surface of our otherwise civil and loving family relationships. In a profound way, Father George felt that he had lost his brother, although I am not certain if it was his brother's eternal soul, his companionship in the faith or his loyalty to their family which he most grieved or sought to save. Perhaps my uncle's prayers were more out of grief for losing his Jewish brother to a life and destiny which he could not and dared not share. He never came to understand how my father's persecution as a Jew during the Holocaust destroyed his faith in Christianity and how only the faith of his fellow Jewish victims and the love of his wife renewed his belief in life. I have only begun to fill in the gaps of understanding from gleaned fragments of memory and from more pointed conversations and deliberate interviews carried on in the face of unspoken family constraints against discussing issues of loyalty and betrayal.

Nicholas and George were born in Hungary to Jewish parents prior to World War I. Waves of violent anti-Semitism throughout Hungary's modern history had repeatedly compelled many Jews to seek baptism. Many would again lose their lives in politically and religiously fueled pogroms following the First World War. My grandparents chose to enter the Catholic Church partly for these reasons and more generally to avoid the shifting social and economic forces that would otherwise severely limit their livelihoods as Jews. Consequently, the brothers were baptized at the age of 7, along with their younger sister, in the Catholic Church shortly after the First World War ended. This at least was the basis for my father's understanding of his family's conversion, as he related it to me over 70 years later. For his part, George rejected his brother's purely pragmatic explanation for their parents' decision to convert. But neither would he confirm my father's further implication of a personal dimension at least to their mother's motivation, one which suggested that my grandmother's conversion helped distance her from her husband's Jewish family, who were of a higher socioeconomic class and who received her into the family with hesitation and coolness. In

my own conversations with him, George seemed unspokenly to embrace-- by my own inference--a more spiritual explanation, one which he may have verbalized to others of his faith but which he would not discuss with his brother's family. But it is clear that for my grandmother, conversion was more than assimilation or a flight into safety or security. In the midst of these social, historical and psychological influences, she may have possessed her own still small voice to guide her to her own purposeful calling. She took her conversion seriously and quickly became devout in the practice of her new faith.

The brothers were born within minutes of each other and were identical in appearance. George was slightly the elder and for that reason may have received the family's spiritual birthright such as it was, for both would one day consider the priesthood. Nicholas came quickly on his heels, if not--as Jacob to Esau--holding on to them. As children, their lives were soon altered by their nation's political situation, as their father had to leave to serve in the military for long periods of time, first for four years in World War I and then

for nearly another year in the post-war anti-communist uprising in Hungary. Because of these military conflicts, George and Nicholas could not attend most of their first two years of school. For another three-year period as teenagers they even lived together in an orphanage in order to attend a school distant from their family's rural home.

Being thrown together by the social and political forces around them, the two boys were constant companions and best of friends in childhood and youth. They looked alike and dressed alike; they played together, got into mischief together and they mutually adopted their mother's love for the written word, reading voraciously and spending their summers trading books with each other. George became fluent in seven languages and Nicholas, even now at age 81, still recites the Greek, Latin, German and Hungarian poetry of his youth.

George absorbed his mother's love of and devotion to Christianity and Nicholas too appears to have been quite at home during his youth and

young adulthood as a Catholic. Gabriella had lost her own mother at age four, then had been raised by an aunt and subsequently by a step-mother. She had suffered numerous psychosomatic illnesses throughout her life, as if her own body had ached continually for the emotional sustenance of her mother. Neither brother--nor their sister--could ever substantially fill in these bare outlines of their mother's seemingly complex personality.

George never spoke to me about his mother's early life, and my father reticently cast only dim light on her origins. My mother, having from childhood known her future mother in law, discreetly throughout the years supplied some of these fragments. I surmise that because of the dislocations in my grandmother's family caused by her mother's death, she was disaffected by her Jewish family and community. Bibliophile and eloquent correspondent though she was, Gabriella was relatively uneducated compared to her husband and came with no dowry to speak of. She must have felt bitterly exiled by her husband's family's seeming rejection of her. The Church for her may indeed have become the protective and healing mother which she could no longer find in her family or community.

When the family moved from Budapest to Barand in the Hungarian countryside, only seven-year-old George accompanied his parents. His brother Nicholas and his sister Clara remained behind for what was to be only a brief delay while the family moved into their new home. However, the post-World War I communist regime of Bela Kun was coming to an abrupt end with considerable civil fighting and turmoil. Travel was dangerous and the communist forces had blown up the railroad bridge near Szolnok over the Tisza River in order to forestall the advance of the zealously anti-communist Rumanian army, thereby effectively preventing travel to the family's new home in Barand. Nicholas and Clara needed to remain in Budapest for over six months living with different aunts until they could pass safely to be with their parents and brother. George's recollection of that time conveyed to me in an audiotaped conversation in 1984 was that he already was firmly entrenched in his parents' new religious faith. A seminal memory of that time was of playing in a Church rectory when his mother called him to accompany her to the train station to greet his brother and sister following

their months'-long separation from the rest of their family.

Their father had just returned from the war, but in his extended absence there might have already been established not only fraternal rivalry but also an intensified if displaced Oedipal struggle between the brothers for the grace of their mother. Though the brothers seemed equally devoted to Catholicism throughout their youth, both serving as altar boys and at different times each considering the priesthood, George's engagement with Catholicism may have been fostered and strengthened by his early uninterrupted attachment to his mother and to the religious faith in which she found acceptance and comfort. Looking back at age 72, he still remembered going with his mother to the Franciscan Fathers' Church on Easter, 1919, at age seven, and staring at the large wooden crucifix over the entryway. "How is God supposed to come back to life?" he whimsically recalled saying to his mother. But in his childishly innocent question, George may have captured and compressed the two most influential events of his emotional and spiritual life, the death of the Son and the years-long, life-altering absence of

his own father, who even at the moment of his childrens' baptism had still not returned from military engagement. Years later, after completing his first year of law studies at Szeged, George felt called to the priesthood, perhaps to confront those central events of his inner life.

George was sent by his diocese to the Pazmaneum, an institution in Vienna housing Hungary's elite seminarians, and then to the seminary at the University of Vienna. He was ordained there and took his first parish in the Hungarian village of Hosszupalyi. On October 28, 1939, immediately after the outbreak of World War II he journeyed to Italy to the medicinal fountains in Foggia for treatment of a recurrent kidney ailment. Even though he was a priest, he was summoned to the local gendarmerie to be questioned by Italian officials as to his Aryan origins. His simple reply was that he was Hungarian. Nonetheless, though he petitioned the German government to be able to return to his own parish, he was prohibited from doing so. Had he returned to Hungary he might have ultimately experienced a fate similar to that suffered by other Christianized Jews in his Nazi-dominated homeland.

Around the time he realized that he might have to remain in Italy for the duration of the war, George first enrolled in interim studies at the Oriental Institute in Rome. Soon after that, he journeyed to San Giovanni Rotondo near the Adriatic to visit the austere stigmatic, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, who was revered as a healer and visionary. When he learned that George's health rather than his studies had been the original reason for his coming to Italy, he convinced George that he would be better served by the country air of San Giovanni Rotondo than by the cluttered urban surroundings of Rome. What began in Italy as an eight-month visit to regain his health became a 17-year stay at San Giovanni Rotondo. In that time, George, being multi-lingual, served as correspondence secretary to Padre Pio and visited the sick in the local community, taking confessions and offering sacraments. Throughout the war years George was protected by a benevolent Italian community which knew of his Jewish origins but saw no good reason to betray him to the Italian Fascists. According to one biographer, Padre Pio had predicted--some say miraculously affected--the safety of San Giovanni

Rotondo from Allied bombs. Thus, though life in San Giovanni Rotondo during the war was not without its dangers and tensions, George and those at Our Lady of Grace Friary lived their lives in quiet devotion and in relative safety.

In contrast, the outbreak of World War II found my father, who had completed his law studies, employed in a bank in Budapest. Even before hostilities broke out, he had begun to feel the rumblings of anti-Semitism which ever since the pogroms of his childhood in the 1920's had stretched and periodically burst the fragile surface of Hungarian tolerance. Yet, living in a country and a city in which many Jews were quite assimilated and where there had been numerous waves of conversion, my father seems not to have felt much tension in being a Catholic among Jewish relatives.

But with each passing year of the war, living under entrenched and state-sponsored political, economic and increasingly violent anti-Semitism, Nicholas felt mounting tension and disaffiliation with his erstwhile Christian

countrymen. A series of three anti-Jewish laws, commencing in 1939 increasingly excluded Jews from the Hungarian economy. While at first there were stringent efforts made by the Church to exempt "Christians of Jewish origin" from such exclusion, eventually they too found it more and more difficult to retain their place in society. My father's own sister, Clara, a practicing Catholic, had been prevented from pursuing advanced studies in chemistry and was unable to find stable work during the war because of her Jewish ancestry.

Then, from 1942 until his deportation to Bergen Belsen in December, 1944, Nicholas was consigned to the Christian Labor Service of the Hungarian Labor Battalions, a well-developed domestic system of isolation and wartime slave labor. It was brutal and murderous, especially for those Jews who were summarily transported to the Russian front and disappeared by the thousands. In the labor battalion, for two years, Nicholas was deprived of his livelihood and essentially forced to provide labor on various government projects, including building an airport and electrical power plant, as

well as street cleaning and ditch digging.

While in this forced labor group with other baptized Jews, my father was in a peculiar no man's land, not knowing whether he belonged with the Christians or the Jews. From the spring of 1944, when Adolph Eichmann entered Budapest to engineer the Nazi extermination plan, and while Jews were forced to wear yellow stars of David on their clothing, Christians of Jewish origin like my father wore white insignias instead. In referring to this period, Nicholas has often noted, "Like the bat in Aesop's tale, I did not know if I was beast or bird". He questioned his nearly lifelong identity as a Catholic and identified more and more with other Jews and with their desperate plight. Once while on a city labor detail in the city of Vac, my father's band of workers--easily identifiable by their insignias as Christianized Jews--was offered coffee by the sexton of the nearby synagogue. When questioned why he would be so helpful to Christians, he responded, "Blood does not turn to water". By this time, my father had realized that in Hungary, despite one's professed religious faith, there were now "real" Christians and

there were Jews and baptized Jews. Largely Catholic Hungarian society was absorbing all-too-readily the racist dimension of Nazi anti-Semitism. No longer was it possible to escape religious persecution through conversion. Jews were seen as the damnable race. Baptism cloaked and extenuated the final decree. It did not eliminate it. Ultimately, my father was astonished and became increasingly disheartened as fellow Christians stood idly by, giving, if not their active complicity at least their tacit consent to the isolation and eventual domestic slaughter, deportation and extermination of almost all of Hungary's 800,000 Jews.

Nicholas' and George's father, Bela Pogany, had for many years been a respected and well-loved veterinarian in the southern Hungarian village of Szarvas. He died a timely death in that community in 1943, a year before the deportations of Hungarian Jews began and before his own likely deportation. My grandfather did not, however, immediately find his final rest as a Christian though he had been baptized and was a practicing Catholic for over 25 year. His body was disinterred and moved from its place of honor in

the Catholic cemetery by a local fascist official--actually the village baker--who did not want his wife's grave defiled by being buried next to someone with a Jewish past. My grandfather's body was moved to the rear of the cemetery, and my father wrote a vehement letter of protest to the Cardinal Primate of Hungary in an effort to have this humiliating action reversed.

The Cardinal Primate, however, simply referred the matter back to the local diocese, where action was never taken. After the war, some of the inhabitants themselves, who had loved and admired my grandfather, pursued and cast the baker out of their village. Today, my grandfather's grave lies undisturbed still in the rear of the cemetery.

My grandmother remained in Szarvas. There at the request of her parish priest she was escorted by Hungarian gendarmes from the Jewish ghetto to daily mass shortly before the liquidation of her community. Ultimately, according to reports of neighbors conveyed to me by aunt Clara, Gabriella's daughter, it was those same gendarmes who conducted her to the death train by which she was deported to Auschwitz. Hungarian laws and prac-

tices had by this time fallen into line with the Nuremberg Laws and with the Nazi zeal to carry out the Final Solution: anyone born a Jew received no dispensation. Regent Nicholas Horthy's gendarmerie, viscerally and violently anti-Semitic from its early inception, had now become the pawn of Eichmann's imperious deportation machine. As author, Miklos Hernadi has noted, the deportation of Hungary's Jews was greeted with either "malicious joy, composure or resignation." That its deportation of Christianized Jews was met perhaps more with the latter than the former makes the nation's seemingly atavistic need to rid itself of Jews not-much-less transparent. The family's home and possessions were confiscated and seized by plundering townspeople no less for their having been owned by respected members of the Christian community.

On the cattle car, my grandmother clung in seemingly unbearable irony to the faith in which she had always found solace and the faith her oppressors claimed to embrace. According to my aunt's report, Gabriella Pogany was seen entering a gas chamber in Auschwitz clutching her crucifix and utter-

ing prayers to her Savior for the blessing of her three children. Jewish victims from her own community shunned her for the special treatment she had earlier received in leaving the ghetto by escort to attend mass, in effect separating herself from her Jewish neighbors. But like them, her unyielding display of faith mocked the inhumanity of her oppressors and thereby sanctified the name of God.

Gabriella had been among the first wave of Hungarian deportees in the spring and summer of 1944. The Germans had engineered the large scale genocide. However, prior to my father's deportation in early December, the newly Nazi-installed fascist Hungarian government contributed its own version of religiously-inspired Jew-hatred and murder in the streets. Nicholas himself had experienced the death of some of his close Jewish friends and colleagues, who were shot by Hungarian fascists and thrown into the Danube River. One friend had even been dragged from his hospital bed by local Arrow Cross fascists after his Jewish identity was betrayed by a nurse.

My father's and uncle's interpretations of these events were colored by their perspective on the extent of Christian involvement in them. Nicholas must have harbored his own painful and confusing amalgam of the converted Jew's version of anti-Semitic self-doubt. While a practicing Catholic into the war years, he knew of his Jewish origins, maintained warm relations with his many Jewish relatives and had considerable friendships and contacts in the Jewish community. He was obviously too aware of his Jewish ancestry, too connected to Jewish relatives, friends and colleagues to side emotionally with Hungarian anti-Semitism, although he remembers well the anti-Jewish teachings of the Church during his years in Catholic school. Indeed, even in Hungary, being a highly assimilated Jew or even a converted Catholic did not make one anti-Jewish. But as in any society, the minority group's internalization of the majority culture's attitudes towards them may have indeed fostered self-doubt, self-hatred and even a willingness to forsake any visible membership in the minority community. Whatever private conflicts he might have had as a convert towards his community of origin quickly dissolved in the face of the growing plight of the Jews. Though my

father would eventually discover that his own mother clung to her Catholicism until her death, Nicholas found it increasingly impossible to separate himself from his fellow victims.

Though he might have had personal, culturally-sanctioned feelings about Jews, I do not believe that my uncle was ever anti-Semitic, certainly never so much so as to sympathize with the genocidal anti-Semitism that would assail his own origins and destroy the lives of members of his family. But a priest in Hungary at that time would have felt far greater tension if he had maintained connections with his Jewish roots or showed much sympathy for the Jewish community. My uncle was never forced under duress to come to terms with his Jewish origins. I would hear him speak from time to time with familiarity and affection of his Jewish relatives in Europe, but I know very little of how he felt about those origins while he still lived in Hungary. At one time he conveyed to my father his belief that the German-born ecclesiastical administrator of his first parish was happy to grant this Jewish-born priest extended sick leave to depart the country. So George was neither im-

mune nor inured to prevailing anti-Semitism in his native country. But the overall atmosphere of Catholic Central and Eastern Europe was theologically and culturally so anti-Jewish that George could not have fully escaped the indoctrination of his upbringing, thereby creating perhaps a deep, unspoken division within himself. He solved or at least soothed that division by all-the-more embracing the salvation he found in his religious faith. In briefly reflecting only in recent years on treatment of Jews in Italy during the war, George appeared to hail the baptism of the chief rabbi of Rome, Eugenio Zoli, and, on another occasion during a recorded and quite rare conversation between the brothers and their sister visiting from Australia, George made reference to Jewish relatives in Budapest whom he himself had baptized prior to the war. (These were relatives who by the way were persecuted nonetheless as Jews and who, like my father, reconverted after the Holocaust.) More than once, George referred to the “terrible times” that befell the Jews in Europe but seemed to view baptism as the way for them to find spiritual salvation if not earthly survival.

George's attitude towards events in Hungary was shaped not only by his absence during the war but by his presence in a peaceful monastic community in a region of Italy untouched by the war. His letters from his home there to my father painted a relatively peaceful and bucolic picture, once stating that from San Giovanni Rotondo one could easily have overlooked that there was a world war going on. While Padre Pio was genuinely anguished over the devastation taking place all across Europe, I have no knowledge of anything he said about the systematic genocide of Jews. That I was unable later even to raise this question with my uncle speaks to my own hesitancy even subtly to question the degree of concern of someone to whom George was so utterly devoted and whose saintly goodness and compassion were so beyond dispute. Although, my uncle did convey to me that Padre Pio felt that George would have been in danger had he returned to Hungary in 1944 to inquire directly into the death of his mother. Pio implored him not to return.

Since George was so far removed from the terrible events unfolding in

Hungary and so profoundly immersed in his spiritual practice and religious vocation, he would have found the connection between Christian anti-Semitism and Nazi genocide unthinkable. I do not believe he ever grasped, or was willing to consider, how receptive Hungary was to German fascism and racial anti-Semitism and how Catholic teachings had contributed to the spirit of Jew-hatred in his native country. He could only see the genocide as an anti-Christian act, a failure of humanity, not something that Christians could have collaborated in. He could only tell me that vengeance belonged to the Lord and that these evil and murderous people would be judged by their deeds in the world to come. I believe that until his death, George was protective of the innocence of Christians and of the sanctity of his Church.

When my father arrived in Bergen Belsen in the winter of 1944, nearly the entire Jewish population of Hungary had been liquidated, either massacred by the Arrow Cross or exterminated, mostly at Auschwitz-Birkenau. As well, many thousands had perished in notorious death marches from the interior of Hungary to the border of Austria. After he left the deportation train that

had taken him from Budapest to Celle, the station near Bergen Belsen in northern Germany, my father trekked to the gate of the camp to the accompaniment of hurled stones and accusatory shouts of the local inhabitants who repeated the millennium-old refrain of "Christ killers." Nicholas has often angrily referred to this event in the face of subsequent claims made by Germans that they were unaware of the deportation of Jews. The brutal irony of being accused of killing the One to whom he had fervently prayed was the death blow to my father's life as a Christian. His Christianity died at the gates of Bergen Belsen while my uncle's continued to flourish in the tranquil friary near the Adriatic.

My father has spoken very little about his months in Bergen Belsen, mostly because he said there was neither dignity in living nor heroics in surviving--just fate and luck. One thing he learned was that death holds no power over him. One lager mate who years later had settled in Israel would inform me in 1973 during my visit there that my father was a gentle and generous soul during his months of confinement who struggled with his religious iden-

tity and who shared his bread when he could with other prisoners. (My stoical and selfless father of course subsequently denied any such claim.)

Perhaps Nicholas' greatest gift to me and to everyone in our family was in his having related that in Bergen Belsen in the spring of 1945, he witnessed starving Jews observing Passover with fragments of wafers. When hope and dignity had been reduced to the bread of affliction, my father reclaimed his Jewish soul and renewed the Jew's belief in life in the midst of his oppression. In that moment, with quiet grace and courage he bore witness to the redeeming God of the Jews and forever changed the destiny of the family he would one day create. I have never seen my father weep but his voice cracked as he choked back tears when only recently--nearly 50 years later--he recounted this turning point to me. Having preserved this conversation on videotape, I, my children and their children will always know the seed of my father's rebirth as a Jew.

Returning by train to Budapest following his liberation in April, 1945, my fa-

ther passed through Prague with a group of his Hungarian comrades from Bergen Belsen. As Nicholas noted to me, the Jewish train attendant, aware of the high degree of assimilation of Hungarian Jews, greeted them: "You have been exemplary Hungarians. Perhaps now it is time to be better Jews."

Nicholas' return to Judaism was also accompanied and inspired by the life and suffering of the woman he loved and married. My mother, Margaret, was his second cousin, was born a Jew and had remained one. Ironically, their mothers, who were first cousins, had grown up in the same apartment house in Budapest. Nicholas, along with his entire family, had been protective of this American-born child whose Slavakian father had died in America before her birth and who was brought back as an infant to her mother's native Hungary. It was Nicholas' mother, who on hearing the news of her cousin's return helped her and her infant daughter re-locate themselves in 1923. She found her a job and a place to live and was the first to notify the deceased husband's family of the mother and child's arrival home. In this

twist of fate, my father's devoutly Catholic mother had helped to save the Jewish infant who would one day take her son back to his Jewish roots and away from the church in which she had lovingly raised him. My grandmother's compassionate and practical assistance to her dear cousin and her cousin's infant daughter might have been the only indirect blessing she would ever be able to give to her son's marriage to a Jewish woman.

I always had the sense that my parents were meant to be together, (in Yiddish, *bashert*). My father, eleven years my mother's senior, had always been a paternal protector of this fatherless child. In a 1937 photo, taken on Buda's bank of the Danube, across from the Hungarian parliament, my 25-year-old father stands with his arm protectively around the 14-year-old, fragile and frightened-looking woman/child with whom he would remain in contact through the next seven years of war, isolation and persecution before their life together would actually begin.

After marrying my father in April, 1944 and spending their wedding night in a

bomb shelter during repeated Allied air raids, my mother, too, was deported to Bergen Belsen around the same time as my father. She was then transported to slave labor in an aircraft factory in Raghoon near Dresden, before being liberated in Theresienstadt. While her mother had survived in the Budapest ghetto, Margaret had lost 13 of her aunts, uncles and cousins, as well as her grandfather in extermination camps, firing squads and SS *aktionen*. Following her liberation, she nearly perished of starvation and tuberculosis, and was confined to a sanitarium for nearly a year and a half. It was there, in a pulmonary hospital in the Buda Hills following liberation, that my father--himself suffering from typhoid fever--noted to me in the same videotaped conversation, "It was the happiest day of my life, that day when I was reunited with your mother in the TB sanitarium after our liberation."

That memory of his reunion with his withered, grievously ill wife who at 63 pounds was barely clinging to life once again brought tears to my father's eyes. Thus, Nicholas' religious turning was primed by his experience in the Holocaust and finally catalyzed by his devotion to his wife who was determined not to forget what she and her family had suffered as Jews. Her own

story and innumerable stories would more than fill these pages and were-- but for the light they shed on my father's life--committed to another essay.

My parents' love, their marriage, and ultimately their ripened commitment to bring Jewish children into the world was forged by their suffering through terrible times of isolation, deportation, tremendous loss and their own near deaths. In 1949, when they had regained their health and were settled in Sweden for 2 years, my mother became pregnant for the second time, having lost an earlier pregnancy soon after her period of recuperation. Only the anticipation of this child, the love of his wife, and the survival of fellow victims gave my father reason to go on. At this time, my father re-entered the synagogue, turning away from the Catholic faith, and was de facto excommunicated from the Church. Nicholas has never made a great display of his religious convictions but nothing has more inspired my own love of being a Jew than his return to the Jewish people and to the God of history, especially at a time when history had become so uninhabitable.

It was not until 1956, the year of the Hungarian Revolution, that after nineteen years of separation, my father and uncle saw each other again.

George came to the United States to visit his brother and to meet his brother's family for the first time. With the sudden growth of the Hungarian refugee community in New Jersey and the departure of local Hungarian Benedictine monks to a monastery in California, the archdiocese of Newark was sorely in need of a Hungarian parish priest. Again, what began as a brief visit turned into a decisive life transition. George served as parish priest in the Hungarian National Parish of the Archdiocese of Newark for 37 years, in the course of which he was elevated by the Church to monsignor and papal prelate.

The first time I saw my uncle I was a five-year-old child. In our third floor apartment in East Orange, New Jersey, I ran hurriedly up from playing baseball to see him and my father entering the living room together. As this diminutive, gentle and somber-looking European immigrant stood next to his virtual mirror image in my father, my mother asked if I recognized who

was who. It was something of a repetition of my grandmother asking her husband who had just returned from four years of cavalry duty in the First World War if he could tell his twin six-year-old boys apart. And perhaps, like my grandfather, I was not certain and tried to hide my bewilderment.

In many ways, throughout my siblings' and my childhood, George was just our uncle; he gave us gifts on our birthdays and took us to murder mystery and horror movies that scared us out of our wits. He bought me my first baseball glove and bat--a 33 inch Louisville Slugger that as a six-year-old I could barely sling over my shoulder much less slug anything effectively. George also managed to attend a number of our family's milestones, such as bar and bat mitzvahs. We children enjoyed telling people that "our uncle the priest" had come to observe these occasions, looking identical to our father but for his priestly collar and sometimes his black or crimson cassock. As a child, I always took for granted his acceptance of and affection towards us. But today, I also recall many silences and a sometimes strained atmosphere which the adults did their best to conceal.

Because it was many years before any of us came to understand how the events of the Holocaust had affected our parents and family, we never came to fully understand or appreciate George's place in that family. We never fully fathomed the unacknowledged emotional undercurrents regarding this strange, somewhat austere clone of our father. As children, all we knew from the past was that our parents had survived some terrible events of which my father was mostly silent and about which my mother spoke repeatedly but about personal events that could not yet penetrate the mind of a child--the death and squalor around her, the monstrous treatment by guards and camp doctors, the bargaining with God and with fellow inmates to change her life if she survived... We knew the dim outlines of our parents' past, but we were more familiar with the shadows they cast than the objects and events which cast them. We knew quite well that we were Jews and that our parents had suffered because they were Jews, in fact that our father had become Jewish again because of his being victimized as a Jew. What we mostly knew was that being Jewish was very important to our parents,

and that it was very important for us now to continue to be Jews.

We also knew vaguely that George was disappointed and hurt by what he felt was our father's betrayal of their family's religious faith. But since we did not yet know what our father had experienced during the war, we did not hold it against George for not knowing or understanding what his brother had been through. But, for us, naturally, it was George who was the marginal figure. On arriving to America, he had agreed to my father's request not to bring up matters of religion with the children so as not to confuse them or divide their loyalties. Looking back I realize that partly because he upheld this oath, we really did not know him. In not knowing his faith, much of what most passionately mattered to him in life was not visible to us. I realize only now how isolating it must have been for him to have to withhold from his own family what was most precious to him. I also recall my childhood fear of being disloyal to my parents by inquiring into my uncle's religious practices and perhaps my father's unresolved Catholic convictions. Only in the last several years has my father let down his guard to

share some of his inner life and his earlier devotion to the Church.

Although the two brothers were at last reunited, the breach between them was never fully overcome. As far as I can determine, George never inquired into Nicholas' experiences during the Holocaust, and Nicholas never brought it up. Without mutual acknowledgement of each other's sadness, grief and bitterness, my father would not have been able to speak to his brother of his wartime experiences without sounding apologetic for leaving Catholicism and marrying a Jewish woman, or angry and accusatory of Christians' complicity in or passivity towards the genocide. Since he did not want to express either apologies or accusations, he avoided the subject altogether. However, he resented the fact that his brother never asked him about his life during the war except to learn more about the circumstances of their parents' deaths. Nicholas admired his brother's religious vocation and was careful not to offend George's Christian sensibilities. Despite his re-conversion, Nicholas never denied his earlier devotion to the Church when I finally asked him openly about it in recent years. He has also noted

frequently, especially during his brother's final years, that he has always revered George as a pious and dedicated priest. Yet the death of my father's Christianity, the sustaining value of his wife's love and shared suffering, and ultimately his choice to live as a Jew were never understood nor accepted by his devout Christian brother.

No one can be sure how George himself might have responded had he been in Hungary during the war. But knowing him later as a benevolent if temperamental priest whose roots were within the Jewish community, I find it inconceivable that he would have participated in or condoned the actions of German or Hungarian fascists. Would he have separated himself from Jews as most Hungarian clergy did, or would he have protested? Would he have tried to save Jews, or only--like other priests--those who had been baptized? To be sure, part of his energies would have been self-protective, for he would not have been immune from persecution himself. Had George been there, and had he witnessed what my parents and many others experienced, it would have been very painful but unavoidable for him to confront

the direct responsibility of Christians and their moral collapse in the face of the destruction of Hungarian Jewry. Out of harm's way, from a place of religious devotion and quiet contemplation, I believe he never dared do this.

Only more recently have I come to realize that what probably most kept Nicholas and George from more complete reconciliation with each other was that they could not acknowledge each other's grief, especially over the death of their mother. Believing that his brother had betrayed the faith by which his mother died, George could not identify with his brother's grief. They lacked even the common ground that the estranged brothers Jacob and Esau had when they came together to observe the funeral of their father, Isaac.

George had long ago said a funeral mass for his mother, probably in San Giovanni Rotondo after hearing of her death, for he told me that Padre Pio had considered her a Christian martyr. I believe that George may have always prayed for her since that time. Nicholas never found a way to mourn,

either as a Catholic or a Jew. As with so many survivors, the destruction by the war of his entire way of life and the immediate exigencies of survival left no opportunity at the time to come to terms with the death of loved ones.

My father's grief could also have been stifled by his awareness that his mother might not have been able to accept his re-conversion to Judaism. In any case, he simply could not say Kaddish for his devoutly Catholic mother.

As a result, Nicholas continued to carry with him his unexpressed tears over his mother's death. His guilt--like the guilt of many survivors--for having survived, and his special guilt for leaving the faith of his family may have remained his own, but his grief became our grief within the family. It had become the grief that I felt swell in my own throat on those rare occasions that I would meagerly attempt to ask my father about his mother, only to be greeted by his own hesitation and silence. For most of my life, I did not dare to tread into forbidden areas of my father's heart nor was I able to fully ask him about his mother without choking on my own questions. And I was not able to speak to others about this loss without feeling a bewildering sadness. I learned only later as now the grown child of Holocaust survivors

and as a psychotherapist that unmourned grief gets passed from one generation to the next.

Therefore, in 1992, as my father's son, as a Jew, and as the bearer of more than my own life's share of grief and sadness, I decided to honor my grandmother's memory by observing the nearly year-long period of mourning during which the Kaddish is recited daily. I did not mourn my grandmother because I believed that her soul needed to be saved; I believe that she had already found final rest long before I uttered my prayers for her.

Rather, Kaddish became a way for me to acknowledge my grandmother's life and death, to honor and diminish our family's grief, a way to ease the access to my father's memory of his mother so that that memory could be transmitted and preserved. Although my grandmother chose to live and die as a Christian, she shared albeit unwittingly in the fate of the Jews. Like so many Jews, she had no *Yahrzeit*, or anniversary date of her death. We never learned the exact date of her deportation or death, though we know that it took place in the summer of 1944. But finally, through mourning her,

the tears (mine/his/ours) for the manner in which she perished finally flowed into the river of Jewish grief. I chose to end the period of mourning on Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, a day of universal Jewish mourning recognizing the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem, the dispersion of the Jews, and the subsequent suffering and oppression of the Jewish people. My own prayers for my grandmother gave me the strength and courage to ask questions more forthrightly and learn more about my family's painful and divided story, to disentangle my father's sadness from mine, but indeed to bind my father's, family's and people's history to my own.

Though the schism between Nicholas and George was never fully or outwardly resolved, it seems odd that these brothers fulfilled such kindred life tasks within almost the same neighborhood of urban New Jersey. George tended to the spiritual and religious lives of his parishioners at the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Irvington; my father worked for the better part of his career as a social worker assisting residents of

Newark's west side ghetto to stay one step ahead of poverty and shame.

His unending devotion to his wife and family has also been part of his life's calling. While George offered spiritual salvation, Nicholas provided his family and community with material dignity and pride. They were both loved and appreciated for the lives they have lived and the work they did by the people they served and by those who served alongside them. Their natural, undeniable affinity for each other, their similar vocations and, perhaps, the unseen hand of their loving parents finally braided together the very separate strands of their lives, just as perhaps God Himself--we are told in the Midrash--braided Eve's hair.

Shortly after George's death, on July 28, 1993, two days after I had completed the period of mourning for my grandmother, my family attended his solemn Christian funeral at the magnificent Sacred Heart Cathedral in Newark near the place of his ministry of almost 40 years. Archbishop Theodore McCarrick officiated, assisted by an abundant host of bishops, monsignors and parish priests from my uncle's ecclesiastical community.

All of the members of George's religious community present at his funeral were extremely gracious to my father and to our entire family in their expressions of sympathy. There was no secret made of my uncle's family being Jewish. During his public tribute, Archbishop McCarrick made respectful reference to George's origins, insisting that George's "knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures" had informed his ministry.

Hundreds of my uncle's parishioners and friends paid their respects throughout the mass and the preceding day's funeral reception. Strangers also came to these events, having heard or read of George's connection with Padre Pio, whose miraculous accomplishments may someday earn his canonization and whose grave is now a much visited shrine in Italy.

However, as his friend and colleague Msgr. Granato noted during George's funeral service, George himself never exploited during his lifetime this nor likely other significant associations in the Vatican. He rarely spoke of the man in whose daily presence he had served for 17 years. George was praised as a selfless, "old-fashioned" priest who was utterly devoted to his

prayer life, his ministry and his Church.

I must leave the manner of grieving for his brother's death to my father's discretion. For myself, I feel more deeply Jewish as I embrace more intimately my father's and uncle's history. At George's funeral reception, I sat quietly before his crimson-clad body, in front of the statue of his crucified Savior, and studied the peaceful visage which could have been my father's. There was the small cameo photo of Padre Pio attached to the rosary clasped gently in his hands. Silently I repeated the words of the Kaddish for this child of Israel become the son of the Mother Church: "Exalted and sanctified be the name of G-d in the world of His creation..." I wanted not only to lift George's soul heavenward but also to surrender my grief for the missed opportunities between these two brothers and their respective houses of faith to more fully heal the unresolved estrangement between them. If only posthumous efforts like reciting the Kaddish could diminish the inner barriers between this devout Christian minister and the quietly courageous Jewish husband, father and grandfather who was his twin brother. For final-

ly, in each other's sorrow and in each other's passion they would have discerned their own.

"Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come forward to me.' And when they came forward, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph...'" Genesis 45:4

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